
Artist Lise Sarfati
Writer Olga Medvedkova

Before going any further, it is necessary to be precise. The photographic journey of Lise Sarfati is only a journey by appearance: it doesn't have anything to do with an excursion or even an expedition, since it is always born and developed with a distinctive slowness. Her territory is very familiar, she is never a foreigner in a country like Russia, in Moscow, Norilsk or Krasnoïarsk, in the abandoned Stalinist industrial zones, in the colonies for delinquent youths or in the clinic where the first transsexual operations were brutally carried out. Others in her situation, more skilled, in a greater hurry, would have made dozens of 'reports' from it, bringing back hundreds of clichéd-proofs. Lise, on the other hand, is never in a hurry, she is able to follow the destiny of adolescent Dostoyevskians for years, lost between Europe and Asia. Everywhere – in the empty rooms of a Muscovite apartment, in the abandoned towns of northern Russia, where months and months pass by – she does no more than live. She inhabits spaces like everyone else, she sleeps in beds that they lend her, she eats what everybody eats, she talks in Russian, everyday language, though she can also quote Russian futurist poems, she wanders round museums and bookstores. By taking 'enough time', she accumulates traces that serve as proof only for herself: books, monstrous toys manufactured during Soviet times, identity photos and typed biographies of delinquents locked in Piranesi-like jails, intimate diaries.

She also takes photographs, hundreds upon hundreds of them, but she never shows them, even though they are all equally as intense and striking. This makes Lise anything but a daytripper, a traveller or a journalist. She doesn't offer any information about the Russian interior or about modern Russia. She is not a collector. At the end of the day, Russia is no more unfortunate or more content than any other part of the world. If there exists any obsession it is a very different one; it is the obsession of being where inexpressible things take place.

When returning from her travels, she walks around her Parisian apartment opposite the Pantheon, unproductive, not running the risk of producing anything, because the mere whiff of 'denaturalisation' would be unbearable for her. She wants it to be as if she had never taken photographs there. As if what she lived through was lived through for its own sake and never in order to produce any material evidence. As if each photo escaped from her despite herself. Although she never returns to her photos in the conventional sense – she never retouches them –, she does work on them a second time, she revives them as if in their crude form, they never belonged to her. As if, in order to become 'proofs' and 'works of art' at the same time, they would have to pass on to another set of eyes. As if she herself had to become someone else in order to understand what she had seen there. In her, this re-creation of the image

that was once recorded manually and materially from a template to a picture, or from a template to a print, from a photo to a print, or from a photo to a photo that's been re-touched, in her, it is produced immaterially through a kind of transformation, or even through psychological mutation.

And so she progressively destroys her records, she empties the useless parts of her memory, purifies it. Any hope of narrative, but also of verification, disappears. The image frees itself not only of the reality of its prototype, but also of its history and the circumstances that led to its birth. It frees itself of the other images taken just before and just afterwards. The image loses its identity, its own name (the very names of the characters and the names of the places) in such a way that the spectator, from what remains, makes sudden, unconscious vertiginous leaps in space and time. Thus, from a 'text' or a 'phrase' there only remains single dispersed words, the only ones that are left, that survive and which, because of this, adopt a rare force, like survivors, replacing all those that no longer exist. And as such, those that remain become signs.

To follow in the footsteps of Lise Sarfati, to follow her in her 'journey', we have to abandon any hope for something 'picturesque' or for any indication of an itinerary and lend ourselves to her aesthetics against the cogito. Submerged in the first instance in the fullness of

that 'long timeframe', later isolated from the context, from any lasting sense that grows from one moment to the other, the instant image doesn't lead to danger, it embodies it. By transforming the sudden, yet nevertheless violently clear 'sensorial impression' into an 'image' object. Lise Sarfati grants us the power not to exorcise the threat but to train it, abandoning ourselves to the threat for a time, counting on it. Only then despite the terrible evidence, can we produce within ourselves a strange sense of fullness; this time, suddenness has become enough.